



# Guardians of Lamu

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A Case Study on the Campaign  
against the Lamu Coal Project



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## An Overview

# Defending Lamu: A Community's Fight Against a Destructive Coal Plant



In 2013, the Kenyan government announced plans to build a huge (1050 MW) coal-fired power plant in Lamu County, Kwasasi, as part of its Vision 2030 industrialization strategy. The US\$2 billion project, to be developed by Amu Power, threatened Lamu's UNESCO World Heritage listed Old Town, as well as its unique biodiversity, including mangrove forests and coral reefs.

More than 600 landowners were set to lose their homes and livelihoods as a result of the 387 hectares of land acquired for the project. Although Amu Power was promising jobs and economic growth, the project lacked transparency, and failed to offer meaningful community consultation, adequate compensation, or resettlement plans. The risks of air, land, and water pollution were major concerns for the community. However, community input was ignored; the government and Amu Power failed to explore alternative energy solutions or acknowledge the looming threat to the ecosystem. This heightened local frustrations that led the people of Lamu to decide to unite and reject this project

This case study documents how the people of Lamu led a grassroots movement that ultimately led to major financiers withdrawing support and the cancellation of the project's environmental license. Read on to learn how this incredible success for the community-led climate movement was achieved, with tips and lessons for the other activists resisting harmful internationally-financed projects.

# From Rumor to Reality: Lamu Community's Discovery of the Coal Project



When Amu Power representatives first approached the Lamu community, they promised work opportunities, school bursaries for their children, and compensation for their land. However, they did not seek the consent or input of the community, leaving the residents in the dark about the details of the coal plant. Many farmers, whose land had already been taken, had little understanding of what the project was about or its potential impacts. Concerned community members came together as Save Lamu – which eventually grew to a coalition of more than 40 community-based organizations – to organize the Lamu community and ensure that their concerns were heard by Amu Power and other decision-makers.

“Information about public participation meetings was poorly communicated, and the venues got changed at the last minute. We sought to attend the meetings and engage Amu Power to provide complete information about the project.”

~ Khadija Shekuwe  
Save Lamu Coordinator



## Tips:

- Promptly seek information on project details.
- Build coalitions to reduce risks to individuals and organizations.
- Walk with the community through each step of the advocacy.

## Strategies in Action

# Community Power: The Steps Lamu Took to Defend Their Land and Environment



Faced with no meaningful responses from the authorities and Amu Power, Save Lamu recognized the need to expand their advocacy efforts. Partnering with local and international organizations, they used a broad range of strategies to fight the coal plant. These strategies included gathering facts on the coal project, engaging with the community, raising awareness through media campaigns, organizing peaceful protests, and pursuing judicial and non-judicial actions for remedy. By combining these methods, the community challenged the project and sought to protect their land, environment, and livelihoods.

## a. Learning and Sharing: Global Lessons Fueling Local Awareness

Save Lamu recognized the need to counter the biased narrative being pushed by Amu Power, which claimed that the coal project would benefit the community. To do this effectively, they needed to gather facts on the real impacts of coal plants. In 2019, Save Lamu organized learning exchange visits to South Africa and India, where representatives from the Lamu community could witness firsthand the devastating effects of coal production. These visits included meetings with coal plant operators, conversations with affected communities, and the documentation of environmental destruction caused by the projects.



“It wasn’t until I went to India that I realized the full extent of what we were dealing with. The effects of coal on human health, marine life, mangroves, and land were devastating and irrecoverable. I felt an urgent need to return to Kenya and stop the project.”

~ Ustadh Mahmoud Abdulkadir  
Islamic Scholar and Board member Save Lamu.

“What we saw in South Africa was very different from what Amu Power told our people. There was massive waste disposal, polluted water, and sick communities. We also heard about tragic cases like stillbirths and miscarriages. The only thriving businesses were dispensaries and pharmacies! We used the footage we gathered to make documentaries and shared them with our community during public forums.

~ Raya Famau  
Board member, Save Lamu and Executive Director  
Lamu Women Alliance.



The findings from these visits revealed how harmful coal projects were to human health, marine life, and local economies. Armed with this knowledge, Save Lamu ramped up their local advocacy, sharing the information they gathered through community forums, radio shows, social media, and public screenings. They ensured that their message was clear, factual, and based on the lived experiences of communities impacted by coal in other countries.



“I visited both South Africa and India, and the situation was the same in both places; poverty, gloom, and no real economic improvement from coal production. We spoke to local people, took videos, and collected materials to bring back and share with our community.”

~ Abubakar Mohammed  
Amu BMU Chairman

“We made sure our message was factual and matched the findings from our research on coal. The photos and videos of our experiences in South Africa and India were especially impactful. They really energized the audience against the coal project, and the testimonies from community members who went on the visits also resonated well with the public.”

~ Hindu Salim  
Community member



Save Lamu also collaborated with international organizations to challenge the economic rationale for the project: with research indicating that the coal power plant would be a costly error for Kenya, burdening consumers with more expensive power for years to come.



## Tips:

- Engage with communities affected by similar projects and connect with regional and international networks to gain insights and build solidarity. Connect with regional and international solidarity groups and networks (such as the African Coalition for Corporate Accountability and the Coalition for Human Rights in Development) and ask for their help to make introductions.
- Use photos, videos, and data to strengthen your case and share findings with your community to foster understanding and action.
- Share knowledge through meetings, social media, and local media to empower your community effectively.

## b. Using Media for Change: How Lamu Mobilized Online and Offline

Besides sharing information about the coal project on their website, Save Lamu was vibrant on different social media platforms including Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and YouTube. The use of social media was very useful for mobilizing local and national support, correcting Amu Power’s narrative about the coal plant, catching the



attention of the global community, and reaching out to would-be financiers of the coal plant project through their social media handles. The campaigns also got coverage in the national dailies and several radio talk shows where members of Save Lamu took turns to communicate their concerns.



“Through social media, we were able to provide daily updates and engage a broader audience in discussions about the coal project. Once we identified the financiers, we tagged them in our posts to make sure they were aware of our concerns.”

~ Mohammed Okeil  
Communications Assistant, Save Lamu.



### Tips:

- Use social media to keep your audience updated and engaged.
- Tag key stakeholders to target them for advocacy and to amplify your messaging.
- Use videos and images to strengthen your message.

## c. Letters and Petitions of Resistance: Lamu’s Call to Action

Save Lamu sent letters to the National Environmental Management Authority (NEMA), the Department of Fisheries, and the Lamu County Government, raising concerns about the coal project and poor public participation. Petitions were submitted to Lamu Governor Issa Timamy and the County Assembly, demanding the rejection of the project and the adoption of renewable energy alternatives. Although many letters went unanswered, the petitions helped document the community’s attempts to engage with authorities.

“We wrote a number of letters and petitions throughout the advocacy period. Through them, we were able to express ourselves without the fear of being misquoted or misunderstood. We also wanted to keep a record of our efforts and build evidence to support other strategies like protests and litigation.”

~ Adam Lali Kombo  
Board Member, Save Lamu



This letter campaign extended beyond national borders. Save Lamu also drew their concerns to the attention of UN bodies, such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which had recognized Lamu Old Town as the oldest and best-preserved Swahili settlement in East Africa.

UNESCO eventually called for the end of the project, due to negative impacts on the World Heritage site.



### Tips:

- Tailor your message so that you are making specific demands to the appropriate office.
- Focus on the core issues that need addressing.
- Clearly state your desired outcomes in all communication.

## d. Protests for Preservation: Lamu's Peaceful Stand Against Coal

Save Lamu, along with civil society organizations and local leaders, organized peaceful protests in Lamu town and Nairobi to resist the coal project. The protests unified various groups and broadened the movement, culminating in the creation of the DeColonize movement, which brought regional and international attention to their cause. Despite government intimidation and arrests, the community's determination strengthened their advocacy efforts.



"The protests gave us strength. The more they persecuted us, the more we realized our collective power. We worked together as one team with a shared goal, never letting individual interests get in the way, no matter how long the struggle took."

~ Walid Ahmed  
Lamu Youth Alliance/Member Save Lamu



### Tips:

- Peaceful protests are good for capturing people's attention and promoting visibility for your cause.
- Expect resistance and intimidation but remain resilient. Anticipate it and have security and contingency plans so that you are not caught off guard.
- Collaborate with different community groups for broader support.

## e. Taking the Fight to Court

On behalf of Save Lamu and individual community members, lawyers with the Katiba Institute filed a petition in court challenging NEMA's granting of an environmental license to Amu Power. The legal team, with support from Natural Justice and the Environmental Law Alliance Worldwide (ELAW), challenged the adequacy of the reports, processes, and decision-making that led to the license being issued.



Lamu based activists Walid Ahmed and Ishaq Abubakar leading the protest at the Lamu sea front



Somo Mohamed Somo, Mohamed Mbwana, Adam Lali Kombo and Swaleh Elbusaidy from Save Lamu join DeCOALonize and other organizations at Central Park, Nairobi in 2019 to protest against Coal.



“The NEMA reports were lengthy and filled with technical jargon, making it difficult for the community to fully understand the environmental and biological impacts of the project. We saw that public participation was minimal, and key information was withheld from those affected.”

~ Lempaa Suyianka  
Advocate, Katiba Institute

“We realized that litigation is a powerful tool when addressing complex projects like the coal plant. It became an essential strategy to hold public authorities accountable for their decisions.”

~ Khadija Juma  
Communications Officer, Save Lamu



A landmark court ruling in June 2019 found that NEMA had failed to ensure public participation and assess environmental risks properly, and led to the cancellation of the project’s environmental license. This legal victory stalled the project’s construction and attracted global attention.



## Tips:

- Use legal action to complement community advocacy, when appropriate. Legal action can be a powerful option to delay or stall a project while other advocacy continues.
- Seek experts help to interpret technical reports and identify potential violations. Organisations such as Natural Justice and ELAW can support you with legal and scientific expertise.
- Amplify each step of your legal and advocacy efforts through the media.

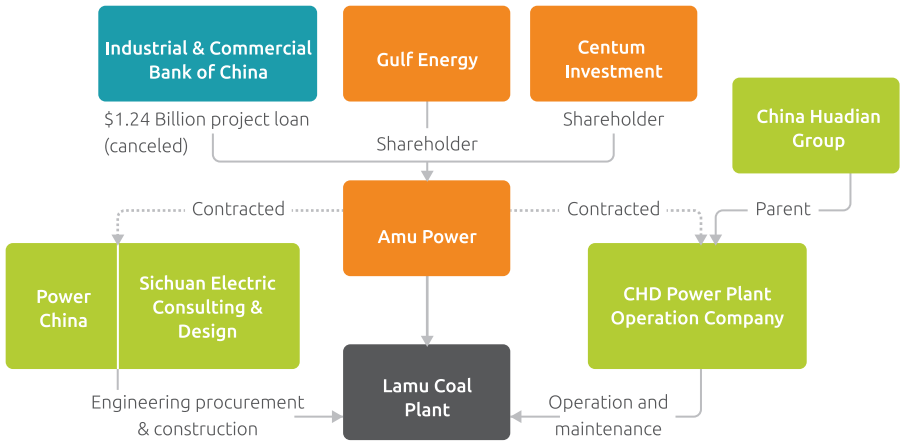
## f. Following the Money

Learning about the financiers of the project assisted Save Lamu to communicate the community’s objection to the project and demand that they stop funding the project.

### I. Understanding Project Financing

It was not easy. But with the help of Save Lamu, supported by Accountability Counsel and Inclusive Development International, (IDI) the community uncovered potential financiers, including the involvement of Centum Investment Group, the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC), Standard Bank, FirstRand Bank of South Africa, the African Development Bank (AfDB), and the International Finance Corporation (IFC).

## Understanding Project Financing



“Amu Power did not make information about the project’s financiers public. It took a lot of research and support from partner organizations for Save Lamu to identify the financial backers.”

~ Khadija Juma  
Communications Officer, Save Lamu

“We later realized our advocacy could have been more effective if we had identified the key players from the start.”

~ Adam Lali Kombo  
Board Member, Save Lamu



### Tips:

- Research and identify project financiers early to guide your advocacy strategy. Do not hesitate to reach out for support. Inclusive Development International’s Follow The Money and SOMO’s The Counter can help with corporate and investment chain research.
- Demand transparency from project implementers about their funding.

## II. Calling Out African Development Bank (AfDB): Advocacy Against Dirty Energy Funding

Save Lamu learned that the African Development Bank (AfDB) was considering a USD 100 million risk guarantee (a form of insurance) for the Lamu coal project. So Save Lamu first reached out to the bank through letters, raising concerns about the project's environmental and social impacts. In May 2018, with the help of partners, Save Lamu facilitated the participation of two of its members in the AfDB's Civil Society Forum in Abidjan. There, they engaged with board members of the bank to highlight ongoing issues, particularly the lack of proper environmental and social impact assessments for the coal plant.



"At the AfDB Civil Society Forum in Abidjan, we were initially unsure of how receptive the officials would be to our concerns. However, we were pleasantly surprised by their engagement. They listened attentively, and their responses reassured us that our efforts were making progress and that we were not fighting in vain."

~ **Raya Famau**  
Board member, Save Lamu and Executive Director  
Lamu Women Alliance.

This engagement paid off when the AfDB withheld its previous decision to offer a partial risk guarantee for the project. By November 2019, the bank officially announced that it would not fund the Lamu Coal Plant and that it had no future plans to finance coal projects!



### Tips:

- Engage financial institutions early. Money enables projects; if you can stop the flow of money, you can stop harmful projects from happening.
- Go to forums where you can engage with decision-makers.
- Celebrate small wins to maintain momentum.

## III. Holding International Finance Corporation (IFC) Accountable

In 2019, through investment chain mapping, Save Lamu learned that the World Bank's International Finance Corporation (IFC) was indirectly involved in financing the Lamu coal project. This involvement was traced through intermediary financial relationships with Kenya Commercial Bank, Co-operative Bank of Kenya, and South Africa's FirstRand Bank, all of which provided financing to Centum Group, the parent company of Amu Power.

With this information, Save Lamu and the Kwasasi Mvunjeni Farmers Self-Help Group filed a complaint with the Compliance Advisor Ombudsman (CAO). The complaint raised concerns about the coal plant’s violation of IFC’s Sustainability Framework, particularly pointing to the incomplete Environmental and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA). It highlighted inadequate consultation with affected communities, insufficient resettlement planning, environmental risks like air and water pollution, and threats to Lamu’s cultural heritage, including its proximity to a UNESCO World Heritage site. The community also criticized the lack of exploration of alternative, less harmful energy sources and the failure to assess the cumulative impacts of the broader LAPSSET corridor linked to the coal project.

“Accountability Counsel supports communities to raise social and environmental concerns about harmful projects funded by international investors, guiding them through independent accountability mechanisms to halt rights violations and secure remedies where harm has occurred.”

~ Robi Chacha Mosenda  
Senior Communities Associate, Africa,  
Accountability Counsel



Despite the concerns raised, the CAO ruled the complaint ineligible, stating that the IFC’s involvement through financial intermediaries did not represent direct, material exposure to the project. While this was a setback, the process raised awareness of the community’s concerns among financiers, leading the IFC to take steps to limit or end its relationships with the banks financing the coal plant. The case also highlighted the challenges of holding international financial institutions accountable when financing flows through local and regional banks, contributing to policy changes requiring more transparency when the IFC indirectly finances high-risk projects like the Lamu coal plant.



### Tips:

- Reach out to experts like Accountability Counsel to help in navigating the accountability mechanism process.
- Consider using accountability mechanisms when the project in question has been financed by international investors.
- Documenting community concerns makes it easier to give consistent and compelling information throughout the accountability mechanism process.

## IV. Lobbying ICBC: Pressuring China's Banks to Defund Coal

After identifying that the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC) was the primary financial backer of the coal project, Save Lamu began working with partners to engage with ICBC through an email correspondence strategy. Although they received no responses initially, Save Lamu persisted.

In June 2019, Save Lamu, The DeCoalonize Movement, and other environmentalists staged protests at the Chinese Embassy in Nairobi to pressure China's financial institutions, specifically ICBC, to withdraw their support for the Lamu coal project. The protest led to a meeting with the Chinese Embassy and other actors, but the ICBC did not attend. Undeterred, Save Lamu continued its efforts to reach ICBC, the primary financial backer of the coal project.

After years of advocacy efforts, Save Lamu was finally able to reach ICBC through a combined strategy using social media, email correspondence, clear documentation of concerns, and public forums to hold the bank accountable for financing the coal plant. Save Lamu's persistence was rewarded in November 2020, when ICBC confirmed that it had discontinued its plans to fund the Lamu coal project.



"We tried to engage the ICBC through email and the Chinese Ambassador unsuccessfully. Our several emails bounced back. The situation was complicated by them not having a local office in Kenya. Along the way, someone leaked out to us contacts of key ICBC staff based at the European head office. We intensified our correspondence through the emails until after about two years ICBC wrote back to us confirming its withdrawal from supporting the project."

~ Mohammed Athman  
Save Lamu Board member.



### Tips:

- Be persistent in your outreach efforts. Even if you aren't getting a response, it doesn't mean that your communications aren't working.
- Leverage relationships and networks to expand your advocacy to targets you otherwise could not reach. Reach out to partners with experience engaging with Chinese actors for support to identify the right contacts and how to reach them.
- Maintain pressure on the project's key financial backers. Money is power.



# The Fight Continues: Lamu's Success and the Road Ahead



The court ruling invalidating the project's environmental license, UNESCO's criticism of the Lamu coal project, and the withdrawal of various financiers validated the long struggle led by Kwasasi Mvunjani Farmers Group, Save Lamu, DeCoalonize, and the people of Lamu.

This fight against a government-backed project highlighted the strength of community organizing, the impact of evidence-based advocacy, and the importance of multi-stakeholder collaboration in challenging harmful projects driven by governments and multinational corporations.

Save Lamu's perseverance is a powerful reminder that, while accountability efforts can be lengthy and complex, they are worth pursuing. They hope that their success will inspire and empower communities around the world to protect their land, rights, and environment.



"The fight is far from over. We still face challenges, especially with unresolved issues like the displacement of Kwasasi farmers and the improper land use conversion by the National Land Commission and County Government. Although the coal project is part of the government's Vision 2030, we must advocate for sustainable energy solutions that protect Lamu's environment and prioritize the well-being of its people."

~ Somo N. Somo  
Chairperson, Save Lamu.







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